

Search for an Identity Through Theatre

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The essential feature of theatre as a performing art is communication. It is the desire to share views on and discoveries of life with others—its joys and anguishes, its beauty and frustrations—that creates a performing artist. The quality of his performance depends entirely on the quality of his mind, his capacity to seek truth and his ability to communicate it. Why he wants to communicate, rather than how he does it, determines the degree of impact his work can have. In the absence of such a personal search and inner conviction a performance remains at best an interesting, at times a clever, exposition.

What prompted me, as a director, to turn to folk and classical theatre? Was it because I thought it was the right thing to do at the right time? Or was my need deeper than a clever theatre strategy?

After having practised theatre in Rangayan for ten years (and believing in every moment of it), I went abroad for three years. There I was confronted with the new challenge of defining my identity personally and in my work. In what way was I, an Indian, distinctly different from the Europeans around me? In what way did my work in theatre reflect my Indian qualities? A confrontation that perhaps I would have never faced had I lived and worked always in Bombay. It was my bewilderment in a new environment that made me consciously search for and define my own Indianness through my work.

I distinctly remember the incident which started me off on my search. In an International Director's Course in Oxford, each of us had to present twenty minutes from Alfred Jarry's *Obu Rua* as an exercise. All my associates, in their treatments of the Jarry play, brought in their distinct national backgrounds. Very hesitatingly, I tried the Tamasha form (which I knew well but had never taken seriously), and it worked beautifully. An almost accidental encounter, but it has stayed with me for the past fifteen years.

Initially, I had reservations about my efforts at trying to under-

stand the folk theatre. I was aware of the fact that I had a middle-class urban mind which was exposed to Alkazi's training, Marathi culture and a semi-Western life-style. Would I be able to imbibe the influences of traditions which are in proper context part of rural life and ritual? While working on my first project, I realized, however, that what I needed to do was to expose my mind to new experiences and thereby enhance my creative sensitivities. My work, therefore, should not endeavour to present a particular folk form but instead reflect my reactions to the folk tradition.

It is on these lines that I have been working ever since. I am not interested in recreating museum pieces of folk or classical tradition. As a theatre worker, I try to discover for myself the beauty, virility, directness and the sophisticated naivety of the various traditional forms, and allow my work to be influenced by my discoveries. I enjoy sharing with my audiences the feel of the period, its smell and texture, an idea of its sound. Authenticity in theatre is meaningful to me only if it conveys the basic purpose of the exercise. I do not believe in indulgence—whether it be in music or movement. In fact, I feel music and dance, in so far as they relate to drama, have to shed their structural prescriptions and take on a new identity, the identity of live theatre, for people who breathe the air of the 'Eighties. □